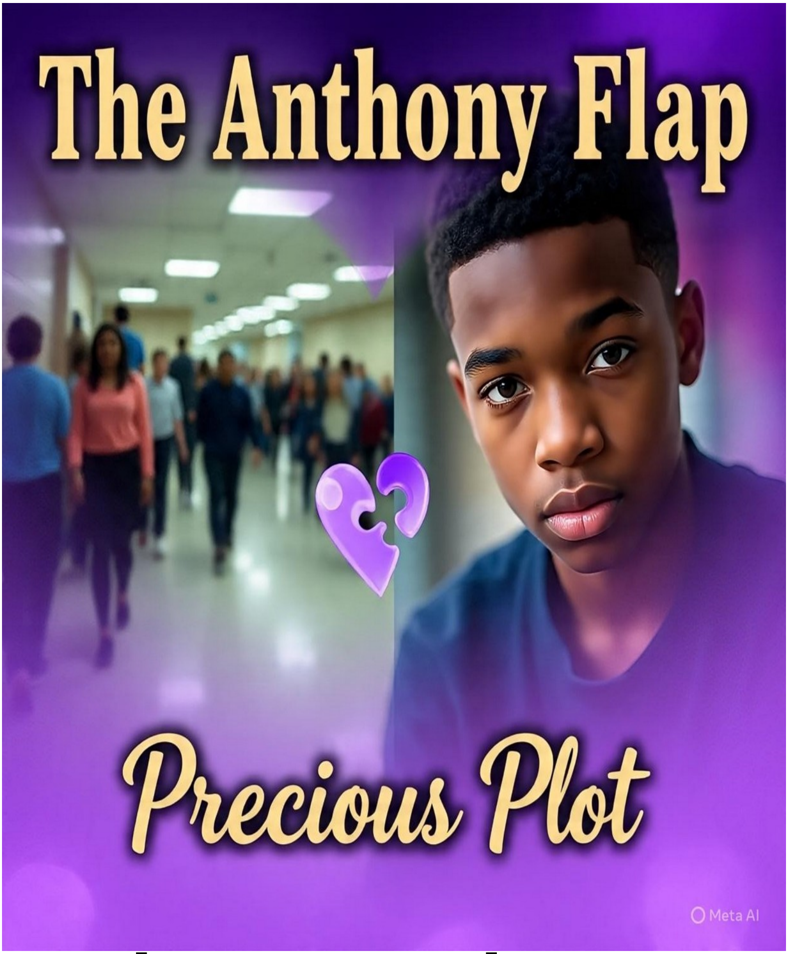
TheAnthonyFlap“PreciousPlo



TheAnthony Flap“Precio

usplot”

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TheRivalryBegins

Anthonytrudgedthroughtheschoolgates,theweightofexpectationheavyonhisshoulders.Thefamiliarsightoftheimposingstonebuildingsandtheneatlymanicuredlawnsdidlittletolifthisspirits.HehadalwaysfeltlikehewaslivinginDaren'sshadow,constantlytryingtocatchup.

Ashewalkeddownthecorridor,hecaughtaglimpseofDarenlaughingwithBecky,thegirlwhohadbeentheobjectofhisaffectionsforwhatfeltlikeaneternity.Anthony'sheartskippedabeat,andhequicklylookedaway,notwantingtogetcaughtstaring.

Hemadehiswaytohislocker,tryingtoshakeofftheefeelingofinadequacythathadbeenfollowinghimaroundlikeashadow.Hismotherwasalwaystellinghimtofocusonhisownstrengths,notcomparehimselftoothers,butitwashardwhenDarenseemedtoexcelateverythinghetouched.

Anthony'sthoughtswereinterruptedbythesou

ndofhisnamebeingcalledoutovertheloudspeaker.Hewasbeingsummonedtotheprincipal'soffice,

hisheartskippedforabit,wonderingwhathadgo
newrong.

Ashemadehiswaytotheoffice,hecouldn'thelpb
utwonderifitwassomethingtodowiththeupcom
ingquizcompetitionwhichhisschoolwasparticip
atingin,andAnthonyhadbeenpracticingtireless
lywithhisteam,theGod'sAngels.

Whenhearrivedattheoffice,hewasgreetedbyth
eprincipal,whowasbeamingwithpride."Anthon
y,Iwantedtotalktoyouaboutthequizcompetitio
n,"shesaid."We'vebeenwatchingyourprogress
,andwethinkyou'reaperfectcandidatetomakeo
urschoolreachagreaterhorizon,forweseeawinn
erinyou.

Anthony'seyesprotrudedduetotheshockthatle
fthiminahugesurprise.Hehadn'texpectedthis
much."Really?"heasked,tryingtokeephisvoice
steady.

Theprincipalnoddedandreplied"Yes,webelie
veinyou,Anthony.You'reatalentedstudent,an
dwethinkyoucandogreatthings."

Anthonylefttheofficefeelingasenseofdetermin
ationwashoverhim.Hewasgoingto

provehimself,notjusttohisschool,buttohimself. HewasgoingtoleadtheGod'sAngelstovictory,andshowDarenthathewasacapableforcetobereckonedwith.

“MarkSheetsareout!”Thenewsspreadlikewildfireasstudentsrushedtotheclassnoticeboard,eagertoseetheirperformanceinthepreviousexam. Anthony,Daren,andBeckyjoinedthecrowd,theirfacesetchedwithamixofexcitementandanxiety.

Anthonyscannedtheboard,hiseyesscanningthelistofnamesandscores.Thereitwas:Daren-1st,withascoreof98%.Anthony'seyesdroppedtohisownname,andhefeltapangofdisappointment. Hehadscored94.5%,adecentscore,buthehadbeenhopingtooutstandDaren.

Thegapbetweenthemwasalways3.5%,theexactmarginhe’dlostinChemistrywhentheletterbledintoamigraine.Anthony'smindflashedbacktothenightbefore,whenhismotherhadmassagedhistempleswitheucalyptusoil,tryingtoeasethetension.

"You’renotcompetingwithDaren,"shehadwhispered."You’reracingagainsttheboyyouwereyesterday."“Alwaysrememberthat,”she

added.Shewantedtoinstillinhimasensethatpeo pleworktobebetterfromwhotheywereyesterda ynottocompetewiththeworld.

Anthonyclenchedhisfists,feelingasurgeofdete rmination.HewasexhaustedfrombeinginDaren 'sshadowandhealsofeltthathewasn'tgoodeno ugh.

Ashewalkedawayfromthenoticeboard,Anthon y'seyesmetBecky's.Shewassmilingathim,and foramoment,heforgotaboutDarenandthepres suretoperform.Heforgotabouthisdyslexiaand thestruggleshefaced.

Allhesawwasagirlwhobelievedinhim,whosawt hepotentialinhimthathesometimesdoubtedhi mself.

Anthony'sheartskippedabeatasherealizedthat hemighthaveachancewithBecky,ifonlyhecoul dfindthecouragetobehimself.

Thebellrang,signalingthestartofthenextclass. Anthonytookadeepbreath,andwalkedintothecl assroom,readytofacewhateverchallengeslaid ahead.

Anthony'sworldwasspinning,andhefeltlikeh ewaslosinghimselfintheprocess.Hehadalwa ysbeendrivenbyacademics,butlately,hecoul dn'tshakethefeelingthattherewasmoretolife thanjustgradesandachievements.

Ashesatinclass,hefoundhimselfstaringatBeck y,hissecretcrush,andwonderingwhatitwouldb eliketobemorethanjuststudybuddies.Hehadb eenadmiringherfromafarformonths,buthelack edthecouragetoexpresshisfeelings.

Theirstudysessionshadbecomeahighlightofhis day,andhelookedforwardtothemmoreandmor e.Beckywassmart,beautiful,andkind,andAntho nyfeltlikehecouldbehimselfaroundher.

Buthewasscared,scaredofruiningtheirfriendsh ipandlosingherrespect.Whatifshedidn'tfeelth esameway?
Whatifshethoughthewasjustadistraction?

BeckyhesitatedasAnthonyhandedherastudyn ote,hereyesscanninghisshakyhandwriting.Sh ehadnoticedthewayhelookedather,thewayhes miledwhensheansweredaquestioncorrectly.

Shehadfeltthesamespark,butherfatherhadalw
ayswarnedheraboutboyswhodistractedherfro
mherdestiny.

Yet,therewassomethingaboutAnthony,som
ethingthatmadeherwanttotakeachance.She
nodded,andAnthony'sheartskippedabeat.

Theirstudysessionsbecameasanctuary,aplace
wheretheycouldbethemselves,wheretheycoul
descapethepressuresofschoolandfamilyexpec
tations.

Astheysattogether,Anthonycountinghertwel
vefreckleslikeapostlesinJoan'sBiblestories,h
e
knewhecouldn'tkeephisfeelingshiddenforeve
r.Hehadtotakeachance,totellherhowhefelt,n
omattertherisk.

Butfornow,hejustenjoyedthesilence,thequietmome
ntstheysharedtogether,andthefeelingthatmaybe,j
ustmaybe,hewasn'taloneinhisfeelings.

AsAnthonyandBeckysattogether,pouringover
theirnotes,theairwasthickwithtension.Theyw
erebothacutelyawareofthechemistrybetwee
nthem,butnoneofthemdaredtomakeamove.

Anthony'smindwasawhirlwindofemotions,hish eartracingwithanticipation.Hewasdevelopingf eelingsforBecky,buthewasterrifiedofrejection. Whatifshedidn'tfeelthesameway? Whatifheruinedtheirfriendship?

Becky,too,wastorn.ShelikedAnthony,buthe rfather'swordskeptechoinginhermind,warn inghertofocusonherstudies.Shedidn'twantt o jeopardizeherfuture,butshecouldn'tdenythew ayshefelt.

Astheystudied,Anthony'sdyslexiaseemedtofa deintothebackground.HewassocaughtupinBec ky'spresence,heforgotaboutthestruggleshefac edwithreading.Butithadalwaysbeenachalleng eforhim,eversincehewasachild.Letterswouldt wistandturn,likesnakesonthepage,makingitha rdforhimtoconcentrate.

Hismotherhadbeenhisrock,stayinguplatewith him,tracingwordsinthedimlylitkitchen,helping himtoovercomehisDyslexia-AssociatedVisualStress(DAVS).

Anthony'sgazedriftedtoBecky,andshecaughth iseye.Hefeltaflutterinhischest,andquicklylook

edaway,tryingtocomposehimself.

Beckynoticedtheglance,andherheartskippeda beat.ShelikedAnthony,butshewasunsureofho wtorespond.Theycontinuedtostudy,theirfeelin gssimmeringbeneaththesurface,noneofthemb raveenoughtomakeamove.

Thesilencebetweenthemwaspalpable,theonly soundwasthescratchoftheirpensonpaper. Anthonywasstuckinlimbo,unsureofhowtoproc eed.Hewastrappedinaseaofuncertainty,withn oclearpathforward.

Butashesatthere,surroundedbythequiethumo fthelibrary,heknewhecouldn'tstayhiddenforev er.Hehadtotakeachance,toriskeverything,and confesshisfeelingstoBecky.

Anthony'seyesscannedthepage,thewordsblu rringtogetherashismindwandered.Hewasdet erminedtooutstandDarenintheupcomingexa ms,butitwasn'tjustaboutwinning.Itwasaboutp rovingtohimselfthathewasgoodenough.

Hismotherhadalwaysbelievedinhim,evenwhe nhedidn'tbelieveinhimself.Shehadstayedupla tewithhim,tracingwordsinthedimlylitkitchen,w hisperingwordsofencouragement."You're smarterthantheseletters,"she'dsay,hervoicetr emblinglikeagentlewhisper.

ThememorybroughtasmallsmiletoAnthony'sfa ce.Hehadcomealongwaysincethen,butthestru gglewasstillon.Letterswouldwrithelikesnakeso nthepage,makingithardforhimtoconcentrate.

Buthewasdeterminedtoovercomeit.Hespenth oursstudyingwithDarenandBecky,slowlybutsu relyimprovinghisreadingtactics.Darenwasn'tj ustarival;hewasamirror,reflectingAnthony'so wnstrengthsandweaknesses.

Astheystudied,DarenwouldslidehisnotestoAnt hony,neatandcolor-coded."You'rebetteratexplainingthanme,"he' dsay,hisvoicefilledwithgenuineadmiration.

Theunspokentruthwasthattheypushedeac hothertobelegends.Theyweretwosidesoft he samecoin,eachfuelingtheother'scompetitivefire.

Anthony'sthoughtswereinterruptedbyBecky's voice,herwordsjoltedhimbacktoreality.Helook edup,feelingaflutterinhischestastheireyesmet .

Foramoment,timestoodstill.Anthonyfelt aconnection,asparkofelectricitythatleft himbreathless.Helookedaway,hisheartr acing,wonderingifshehadfeltittoo.

Anthony'sstudysessionswithBeckywereamixe dbagofemotions.Ononehand,hewasthrilledtob espendingtimewithher,andontheother,hewass trugglingtokeepupwiththecoursework.Hisdysl exiawasaconstantcompanion,lurkinginthesha dows,waitingtopounceandruinhisconcentratio n.

Astheypouredovertheirnotes,Anthony'sheada chesflaredup,makingitdifficultforhimtofocus.T helettersonthepagebegantobleedintothemar gins,likespilledtea,makingitimpossible forhimtomakesenseofthewords.Beckynoticed hisdistressandquicklycametohisaid.

"Trythis,"shesaid,coveringhalfthepagewithabookm ark."Onelineatatime."

Anthonywasskepticalatfirst,butashebegantoread,hefeltasenseofcalmwashoverhim.Thewordsbegantotakeshape,andhewasabletomakesenseofthem.Forthefirsttime,hereadafullparagraphwithoutpain,anditwasaliberatingexperience.

HelookedupatBecky,ahugegrinspreadingacrosshisface."Ididit!"heexclaimed,hiseyesshiningwithexcitement.
Beckysmiledback,hereyessparklingwithpride.
"Iknewyoucoulddoit,"shesaid,hervoicefilledwithencouragement.

Anthonyfeltasurgeofhappinessandconfidence.WithBeckyonhisside,hefeltlikehecouldtakeontheworld.HewasdeterminedtooutstandDareninthe upcomingexams,notjustforhimself,butforBecky,andforhismother,whohadworkedtirelesslytohelphimovercomehisdyslexia.

Astheycontinuedtostudy,Anthony'sthoughtsturnedtoDaren.Hewasaformidableopponent,butAnthonywasconvincedthathehadfoundawaytooutstandhim.Daren,forallhisacademicprowess,wasnotinvincible.

LittledidAnthonyknow,Darenwasfightinghiso wnbattles.Hecamefromadifficultbackground, andhisdrivetosucceedwasfueledbyadesiretoe scapethepovertyandhardshipthathaddefined hischildhood.Hewasnotselfish,andhisgenerosi tyandkindnesshadearnedhimtherespectanda dmirationofhispeers.

WhentheMarkSheetswerereleased,Anthony's heartskippedabeatashesawhisnameatthetop oftheclass.Hefeltlikehewasoncloudnine,andh ecouldn'twaittosharethenewswithBeckyandhi smother.

As he walkedhome, Anthony felt asense ofpride andaccomplishment.Hehadworkedeffortlessly ,andithadpaidoff.Heknewthathestillhadalong waytogo,butfornow,hewascontenttobaskinth eglowofhissuccess.

Beckywaswaitingforhimatthegate,ahugesmile onherface."Congratulations!"sheexclaimed,th rowingherarmsaroundhiminatighthug.

Anthonyfelthisheartskipabeatashewrappedhi sarmsaroundher,holdingherclose.Heknewthat hehadfoundsomethingspecialinBecky,someth ingthatwentbeyondfriendship.

Astheywalkedhometogether,Anthonyreal ized
thathewasnolongerjustcompetingwithDar en,
hewascompetingwithhimself,andwiththedo ubts
andfearsthathadheldhimbackforsolon g.

Theinsight

Previouslyintheholidays,Anthonyhadparticipatedinanonlinequizthathecameacrossasanadvertisement,hethereforesignedinhisaccountinWPSOfficesincehewasanICTaddict.ThequizwascenteredontwoofthePhysicalcalculativesubjectsandtomakeitoptimal,thesetwosubjectswereAnthony'sbestsubjectssincehethoughtofthemassubjectsthatneededunderstandingeverytimeatopicwastobeintroducedinclass.Hedidn'thesitatetoapplyforthequizandinnotimethequizhadtocommence.

Itwastobedoneinroundsanditwasforstudentsacrossthewholenationanditwastobeinteamsandeachteamhadtohaveonlymembersofdifferentschoolssoastocreateco-operationamongthestudentsinthedifferentsch

oolsthatweretoparticipate.

Theinstructionsforchoosingthepartnerswereeasytofollowandtheywere;

1. Allstudentsshouldsubmitinafilledform thathastheirpassportphoto,fullname, age,contactandschooltothequizportal.
2. Studentsweresupposedtobeingroupsoffive-fives.
3. Ifagrouphasmorethanonestudentfromthe sameschool,thatgroupwillbedisqualifiedanditwon'tbeabletoparticipateinthequizactivity.
4. Thestudentstobefoundcooperatingorsharinganswersbutindifferentgroupsaretoleadtoadisqualificationofboththeir groups.
5. Allstudentsweresupposedtostayonline tillthequizsessionwasdoneeveryday.
6. Nostudentswereallowedtolookanywhereelseapartfromthescreenorthecamera.
7. Ifamemberofagroupfailedtoattendaquizsession,thewholegroupwouldbedisqualified.
8. Allgroupmembersweretobeatthequizpointatexactly8:00amandfailuretodosowouldleadtolossofmarks.

9. Allteamsweretoparticipatefromdiff erentschoolsthatweretobegiventot hembytheboard.

10. Nostudentswereallowedtogowiththeirphonesinsidethequizroomsincethesessionsaresupposedtobefair.
11. Allgroupswillbegivenamaximumofsixtysecondstothinkofanddiscussaquestiongiventothem.
12. Timeconsciousiskey_delayinansweringleadstodeductionofmarks.
13. Aquestionfailedtoanswerwillbepassedontothenextgroupandthatgroupwillqualifyforabonusmark
14. Acorrectanswercarries10pointsandawronganswercarries-2points.
15. Failuretogiveananswer-1point.
16. Allteamsshouldhaveoneteamleaderwhowilloverseethegroupperformanceandparticipationingeneral.
17. Allmembersintheirrespectivegroupsshouldevenlyparticipatesoastogetmarksforteamworkandcooperation.

Theabovewerethequidelinesofthequizfromdayonetodayseven.

AllparticipantsthoughtofthisquizasagoodexperienceandthatitwouldhelpimprovetheiracademicperformancesincethesetwosubjectsweretheostfailedsubjectsinUgandaatthe

SecondaryLevelandmanyofthemwereexcited aboutit.

Anthonyontheotherhandonlythoughtofitasaw asteoftimesinceheknewhimselfwhenitcamet othesesubjectsinregardtoperformanceandso hejoinedthisquizsoasnottoalwaysdohousech oresathomesincebythentherewerefewpeople athishomeandthishadworriedhimalready.

Day1

AnthonysuggestedanameforhisteamtobeGod' sAngelsandmanysecondedhissuggestion.The yhadtochooseagroupleader,Anthonybroughta suggestiononhowtochooseagroup leader.Hesaid“Let'sformourownquizandthe winnershouldbeourgroupleader.”“Itshouldbei nanothersubjectlikeEnglishsoastoensuretheb estoutofus.”Headded.

Hedidthissothatitwouldn'tfallonhimtobethegr oupleader.
Oneofthemembers,EricfromSacredHeart InternationalSchoolsaid,“Thequiziscenteredo nMathematicsandPhysics,calculativephysical subjects.Soifwemakeourminiquizinthesetwos ubjects,itwillbeapracticeonourside.”He

continues,“Thiswillalsobeanassuranceforusto bethewinnersofthistournament” Allthegroupmembersnoddedinacceptanceand theyalllookedatAnthony.

Atthismomenthehadnosayapartfromacceptin gwhatwasbroughtupbyEric.

Theybeganoffimmediately_eachofthemwasto writedownfivequestionsoftheirkindinMathem aticsandfiveotherquestionsinPhysicssothatth epersonthatwouldpassmostofthequestionswil lthenbetheheadofthegroup.

Allofthemwrotetenquestionoftheresttorespon dto,theystartedansweringandinaroundanhour Anthonywasdonewithallthequestionsbuthepr etendedasifhewasstillwriting_Ericsawthisandr ealizedthatinthewholegroup_Ifhewasnotthebe stthenhewastobetheworst.

Whentheywerealldone,everyonereceivedcopi esofanswersfromothersformarking.Bylunchti me,everyonewasdonewithmarkinganddeclara tionoftheleaderwastobedoneafterlunch.

Immediatelyafterlunchresultsweredeclaredan ditturnedoutthatAnthonywasthebestsoheauto maticallyhadtobecometheteamPresident.

Day2

Thequizhadtobegin.

Atexactly8:30amthefirstquestionwasouttothe God'sAngelsgroupandthismadethemveryhap pysinceitwasthesamequestionthatAnthonyha dgiventothemearlierduringtheselectionofthe groupleader.Anthonyraiseduphishand_hewas giventhepodiumandhegaveananswerwithjust ificationsoastoexecuteallthepointsandtoleave theothergroupswithnoaddition.

Thismadetheirgrouptobetheleadinggroupbyth en.Questionswerefiredtoothergroupsandallth atwouldfailothergroups,Anthony'sgroupwould giveitatryandtheywouldactuallygetthebestofit andgetthebonuspoints.

AnthonyandEricmadeagoodteamsincetheyco uldactuallyfindwaysofsolvingthetoughestequ ationtogetherandthismadeAnthonyandEricve rygoodfriends.

Daytwoturnedouttobeasuccessforthe God'sAn gelsandattheendtheyhadtogobackhomevictor ioust hatday.Anthonypromisedthemawinatthe endofthequizandbytheirexperienceinthefirsta ctivedayofthequiztournament.

Day3

Asthequizresumed,Anthony'sgroup,theGod's Angels,werestillinhighspiritsfromtheirpreviou swin.Theywereconfidentandfocused,readyto takeonthenextchallenge.

Thehostannouncedtherulesofthenextround:e achteammemberwouldbegivenapassagetore adandthenexplainwhattheyhadread.Thetwist wasthatthepassageswerefromacompletelydiff erentsubject,onethattheyhadn'tstudiedbefore .

Anthony'sheartsankasheheardtherules.Hekne whewasintrouble.Hehadstruggledwith readingsincechildhood,andthethoughtofreadi ngaloudinfrontofhispeersmadehimanxious.

Thefirstteammember,Eric,wentuptoreadth epassage.Hereaditfluently,explainingthem ainpointsandconceptswithease.Theotherte am

membersnoddedinagreement,impressedbyE
ric'sperformance.

NextwasAnthony'sturn.Hestoodup,hishandss
hakingashetookthepaperfromthehost.Helook
edatthepassage,butthewordsswirled
togetheronthepage,makingnosensetohim.

Hetookadeepbreathandbegantoread,stumbli
ngoverwordsandphrases.Theroomfellsilent,a
ndAnthonyfeltlikehewastheonlyonewhocould
n'tunderstandwhatwashappening.

Thehostintervened,askingAnthonytostop."Do
n'tworry,Anthony,"shesaidgently."We'llmove
ontothenextteammember."

Anthonysatdown,feelingembarrassedan
ddefeated.Heknewhehadlethisteamdow
n.

ButEricandtheothersdidn'tseemtomind.Theyp
attedhimontheback,tellinghimitwasokay,thatt
heywerestillateam.

Astheroundcontinued,Anthony'steammembersimp
ressedthejudgeswiththeirknowledgeandunderstan
dingofthepassage.DespiteAnthony's

struggles,theymanagedtopullthrough,securingare
spectablescore.

TheGod'sAngelsregrouped,determinedtomak
eacomebackinthenextround.Anthonyknewit
wouldn'tbeeasy,buthewasgratefulforhisteam'
ssupportandencouragement.

"We'restillinthis,"Ericsaid,grinningatAnthony.
"We'vegotthis."

Anthonysmiled,feelingasurgeofdetermination
.Hewaswillingtodoeverythinginhispowertohel
phisteamwin.

Littledidtheyknowthatthenextroundwouldbet
hemostchallengingyethethoughtitwouldbeth
eeasiest.

Day4

ItbeganwiththeGod'sAngelsstillbaskinginthegl
oryoftheirpreviousday'swin.Theyallsmiledast
heygatheredaroundthevirtualtable,eagertose
ethechallengesthatlaidahead.

Thehostannouncedthattheday'sroundwouldb
easurprise,andthattheteamswouldhavetowo
rktogethertosolveacomplexproblem.Theprob

lem

wasprojectedonthescreenwhichhadapuzzlein volvingphysics,math,andlogic.

Anthony'steamgottokickoff,discussinganddeb atingthesolution.Anthonysharedhismathskills ,whileEricworkedonthePhysicsaspect.Theothe rschippedinwiththeirideas,workedslowlybuts urelyandtheystartedtomakesomeprogress.

Astheycarriedonwiththeirwork,Anthonycouldn 'thelpbutfeelasenseofprideandbelonging.Heh adneverfeltthiswayaboutateambefore,anditw asexhilarating.

Theteam'shardworkpaidoff,andtheymanage dtosolvethepuzzlejustbeforetimeranout.Thej udgeswereimpressed,andtheGod'sAngelsear nedthemselvesanotherwin.

Astheycelebrated,Anthonyrealizedthathehad actuallyenjoyedthechallenge.Hewasstartingt oseethathisdyslexiawasn'talimitation,butrath eradifferentwayofthinking.

Theteam'snextchallengewastopresentaprojec tonatopicoftheirchoice,showcasingtheirskills

andcreativity.Anthony'seyeslitupashehadanidea…

Day5

TheGod'sAngelswerebuzzingwithexcitementastheypreparedfortheirprojectpresentations. Anthonyhadcomeupwithabrilliantidea,andtheteamwasconfidentthattheywouldextremelyshockthejudges.

Astheytookthevirtualstage,Anthonybegantoexplaintheirproject“amobileapp”thatwouldenablestudentswithdyslexiatoreadandlearnmoreeffectively.Theteamhadworkedeffortlesslytocreateaprototype,andAnthony'sownexperienceshadspearheadedtheinspirationforthatproject.

Thejudgeswereimpressed,andtheteam'spresentationwasmetwithapplause.TheGod'sAngelsemergedastheleadinggroup,anditwasanyone'sfoodforthought.

Butjustastheywereabouttocomplete,disasterstrucktheirway.Theplatformcrashed,andtheteam'spresentationwaslost.TheGod'sAngelsweredevastatedandextremelydisappointed.

Anthony'steamwasgivenachancetopresenta gain,buttheywereshaken.Anthonytookadeep breathandbegantospeakouthisheart,sharing hisownstruggleswithdyslexiaandhowtheapph adchangedhislife.

Thejudgesweremoved,andtheGod'sAngels'de terminationandteamworkshonethrough.Asth eresultswereannounced,theGod'sAngelseme rgedvictoriousasthewinnersofthequizcompeti tion.

Anthonyandhisteamhuggedeachother,withte arsofjoystreamingdowntheirfaces.Theyhadd oneit- theyhadovercometheirchallengesandemerg edvictorious.

Astheycelebrated,Anthonyrealizedthathehadl earntsomethingmuchmorevaluablethanjustq uizanswers.Hehaddiscoveredhisownstrength, andthepowerofteamworkplusdetermination.

Day6

TheGod'sAngelswereoncloudnineastheywoke uptocongratulatorymessagesfromfriends,fami ly,andevenrivalteams.Thenewsoftheirvictoryh adspreadlikewildfire,andtheywerehailedasher

oes.

Anthony'smotherwasbeamingwithprideasshe huggedhimtight."Iknewyoucoulddoit,Anthony !"sheexclaimed.Anthonyfeltasurgeofgratitude towardshismother,whohadstoodbyhimthroug hthickandthin.

Theteam'svictoryhadalsocaughttheattentiono fthemedia,andtheywerebombardedwithinterv iewrequests.TheGod'sAngelsdecidedtogiveaj oint interview,sharingtheirstoryandinspiringothers withtheirjourney.

Astheysatdownfortheinterview,Anthony'sdys lexiawasbroughtup.Hetookadeepbreathands haredhisstory,hopingthatitwouldhelpothersw howerestruggling.

Theinterviewwasmoved,andtheGod'sAngels' messageofperseveranceandteamworkresona tedwithviewersacrossthecountry.

Theteam'svictoryhadalsoearnedthemacashpr ize,whichtheydecidedtodonatetoacharitygrou pthatsupportedstudentswithdyslexia. Anthonywasoverwhelmedwithemotionasheth oughtabouttheimpacttheycouldmake.

Asthedaydrewtoaclose,theGod'sAngelsreflectedontheirjourney.Theyhadstartedasstrangers,buthadbecomeafamily.Andtheyknewthatnomatterwhatthefutureheld,theywouldalwayshaveeachother'sbacks.

TheGod'sAngels'storywasfarfromover,buttheywerereadyforwhatevercamenext,knowingthattheyhadthepowerofteamwork,determination,andastrongbondtocarrythemthrough.

Day7

Thefinaldayofthequizcompetitionhadarrived,andtheGod'sAngelsweretobeawardedatrophyinagrandceremony.Theteamwasecstaticastheymadetheirwaytothestage,surroundedbycheeringfansandwell-wishers.

Astheyreceivedthetrophy,Anthony'seyeswelledupwithtears.Hethoughtaboutthejourneytheyhadtaken,thestrugglestheyhadovercome,andthebondtheyhadformed.

TheGod'sAngelswerehailedasheroes,andtheirnamesbecamesynonymouswithexcellenceanddetermination.Theyhadprovedthatwithhardworkandteamwork,thatanythingwaspossible.

Astheyposedforphotosandgaveinterviews,Anthony'smindwanderedtothefuture.Heknewthathehadabrightfutureaheadofhim,andhewasexcitedtoseewhatdestinyhadinstalledforhim.

TheGod'sAngels'storywasoneoftriumph,perseverance,andfriendship.Theyhadshowntheworldthatwithdeterminationandteamwork,eventhemostimpossiblechallengescouldbeovercomed.

Andastheywalkedoffthestage,trophyinhand,theyknewthattheywouldalwaysbechampions,notjustofthequizcompetition,butoflifeitself.

TheGod'sAngels'journeyhadcometoanend,butanewchapterwasabouttobegin.Onethatwouldtakethemtogreaterheights,andinspireotherstochasetheirdreams.

ThecurtainfellontheGod'sAngels'story,butthememoriesandlessonswouldbepartoftheirlivesforever.
Afterthequiz,Anthonyreturnedhome,exhaustedbutexhilarated.Hismother,stillworkingasanurse,wasalreadythere,preparingdinnerinthekitchen.

"Hey,Mum!"Anthonycalledout,droppinghisba gonthefloor.

Hismotherturnedaround,awarmsmileonherfa ce."Hey,sweetie!Howwasyourday? Howdidthequizgo?"

Anthonygrinned,feelingasenseofpride."Itwasa mazing,Mum! Wedidreallywell.Ithinkwehaveagoodchanceof winning."

Hismotherbeamedwithpride,wipingherhandso natowel."That'smyboy! Iknewyoucoulddoit.Tellmeallaboutit."

Anthonylaunchedintoanexcitedrecountoftheq uiz,relivingthehighlightsandsharinghisfavorit emomentswithhismother.Shelistenedattentiv ely,askingquestionsandofferingwordsofencou ragement.

Astheytalked,Anthony'smotherbegantoprepa redinner,whippingupastorminthekitchen.Thea romaofpreparedfoodfilledtheair,makingAntho ny'sstomachrumblewithhunger.

Afterdinner,Anthonysettledintodohishomework,fee

lingmorefocusedandmotivatedthanever

before.Hismothersatbesidehim,helpinghimwit hdifficultquestionsandofferingguidancewhene verheneededit.

Astheeveningdrewtoaclose,Anthony'smother gavehimahug,hereyesshiningwithpride."I'ms oproudofyou,Anthony.You'reworkingsoharda ndit'spayingoff.Iknowyou'lldogreatthings."

Anthonysmiled,feelinghappyandcontent.He knewhehadhismother'sunwaveringsupport,an dthatgavehimtheconfidencetokeeppushingfor ward,nomatterwhatchallengeslaidahead.

Theundoneexa m

Astheexamsapproached,Anthonywasmoredeterminedthanevertooutstandaren.Hespenteverywakingmomentstudying,pouringoverhisnotesandtextbooks,hismindfocusedonabsorbinganddigestingeverylittlebitofinformation.Hisdeterminationwasfueledbyaburningdesiretoprovehimself,toshowDarenandeveryoneelsethathewascapableofachievinggreatness.

Hespenthoursinthelibrary,surroundedbydustytomesandflickeringfluorescentlights,hiseyesscanningthepagesashedevouredknowledge.Heattendedextratutoringsessions,seekingguidancefromhisteachersandclarifyinganydoubtshehad.Herevisedpastpapers,honinghisskillsandbuildinghisconfidence.

Anthony'shardworkpaidoff,ashebegantodiscoverenhancementsinhisgradesandhis understandingofthematerial.Hefeltasenseofprideandaccomplishment,knowingthathewaspushinghimselftobethebesthecouldbe.Hisfriendsandfamilynoticedthechangeinhim,commentingonhisdedicationandperseverance.

Asthedaysturnedintoweeks,Anthony'sdeterminationonlygrewstronger.Hewasdrivenbyafiercecompetitivespirit,determinedtocomeout

ontopandprovehimselfasthebest.Heknewthat itwouldn'tbeeasy,thatDarenwasaformidableo pponent,buthewa55sconvincedthathehadwh atittooktowin.

Thenightbeforetheexams,Anthonywasabundl eofnerves,hisstomachchurningwithanxietyan dexcitement.Heknewthatthiswasit,themome ntoftruth,andhewasdeterminedtomakethemo stofit.Herevisedhisnotesonelasttime,tookade epbreath,andwenttobed,readytofacewhateve rthenextdaywouldbring.

Thenextmorning,Anthonywokeupfeelingrefre shedandfocused.Heateaheartybreakfast,puto nhisluckyshirt,andheadedoutthedoor,readyto takeontheexams.Hewalkedintothe examhallwithconfidence,hisheadheldhigh,an dhiseyesfixedontheprize.

Onthedayofthelastexam,Anthonywasinthemi ddleofareviewsession,pouringoverhisnotesan dmakingsurehehadeverylastdetailconnectedt ohismemory.HewasdeterminedtooutstandDar en,andheknewthatthiswashislastchance.

Justashewasgettingintothezone,hisphonerang ,shrillingloudlyinthequietroom.Anthony's

heartsankashesawhismum'snameflashingont hescreen.Hehesitated,wonderingwhatcouldb ewrong,butheknewhecouldn'tignorehercall.

"Hello,Mum,"heanswered,tryingtokeephisvoiceste ady.

"Anthony,Ineedyoutocomehomeimmediately, "hismumsaid,hervoicefirmbutworried.

Anthony'sheartsankfurther."Mum,Ican'tcome homenow.I'minthemiddleofanexamreviewses sion.It'smylastchancetooutstandDaren."

Buthismumwasinsistent."Anthony,Ineedyouto comehomenow.It'simportant."

Anthonyfeltasurgeoffrustrationanddesperatio n.Heknewthatifhelefttheexam,hewouldbethro wingawayhischancesofoutstandingDaren.But hecouldn'tignorehismum'splea.

"I'lltrytoexplainlater,Mum,"hesaid,feeli ngdefeated."ButIhavetocompletethisre viewsession."

Butitwastoolate.Hismumhadalreadycalledthes chooladministration,andtheywerewaitingforhi moutsidetheexamhall.

"Anthony,youneedtocomewithus,"oneoftheadmini stratorssaid,approachinghim.

Anthonyfeltlikehe'dbeenpunchedinthegut.He hadtoleavetheexamandgohome,feelingdefea tedanddevastated.

Whenhearrivedhome,hewassurprisedtoseeastrang ersittingintheirlivingroom.Hismum introducedhimasMr.Harrison,theheadofthequizco mpetitionthatAnthonyhadparticipatedin.

Anthony'seyesprotrudedinshockasMr.Harriso nexplainedthathehadbeenimpressedwithAnt hony'sperformanceinthequiz."Ihadtocomean dmeetyouinperson,"hesaidwithasmile."You'r eanexceptionalstudent,Anthony.Iwouldliketo sponsoryoureducation."

Anthony'sjawdropped.Hecouldn'tbelievewhat hewashearing."What?Why?"hestammered.

Mr.Harrisonchuckled."Iwasovertakenbyyourpartici pationinthequiz.Youshowedsuch

determinationandresilience.IknewIhadtosupp
ortyou."

Anthony'smumbeamedwithpride,tearsofjoyin
hereyes."Thisisamazingnews,Anthony.You'llb
eabletopursueyourdreams."

Anthonyfeltasurgeofgratitudeandrelief.Hehad
thoughtthathischancesofoutstandingDarenw
ereruined,butnowhehadanewopportunity,ope
ningupbeforehim.

AshesatdownwithMr.Harrisonandhismum,disc
ussingthedetailsofhissponsorship,Anthonyfelt
asenseofhopeandexcitement.Heknewthatthat
wastheGenesisofhisnewapproachinlife,oneth
atwouldtakehimtoplaceshe neverthoughtpossi
ble.

Theroomwasfilledwiththewarmglowoftheafter
noonsun,andthesoundoflaughterandconversa
tion.Anthony'sheartwasfullofjoyandgratitude,
andheknewthatthiswasamomenthewouldnev
erforget.

Anthony'smumbroughtinsomerefreshments,a
ndtheysatdowntodiscussthedetailsofthespons
orship.Mr.Harrisonexplainedthathewould

becoveringAnthony'stuitionfees,accommodation,andotherexpenses,allowinghimtofocusonhisstudieswithoutworryingaboutthefinancialburden.

Anthonyfeltoverwhelmedwithgratitude.Hecouldn'tbelievethathislifewasabouttochangeinsuchadramaticway.Helookedathismum,whowasbeamingwithpride,andfeltasurgeofloveandappreciationforher.

Astheytalked,Anthony'smindwasracingwiththoughtsofthefuture.Heknewthathehadalotofhardworkaheadofhim,buthewasreadyforthechallenge.Hewasdeterminedtomakethemostofthisopportunityandachievehisdreams.

ThemeetingwithMr.HarrisonwasaturningpointinAnthony'slife,onethatwouldtakehimonajourneyofdiscoveryandsuccess.Heknewthathewouldalwaysbegratefulforthechanceencounterthathadchangedhislifeforever.

Duringthemeeting,Anthonymustereduptheco uragetosharehisdreamswithMr.Harrison."Sir,Iwanttobeateacher,"hesaid,hisvoicefilledwithconviction.

Mr.Harrison'seyeslitupwithinterest."Ateacher, yousay?Whatmakesyouwanttopursuethat careerpath,Anthony?"

Anthony'sfaceglowedwithenthusiasm."Iwant tohelpothers,sir.Iwanttobepartofthesuccesso fothers.Iknowwhatit'sliketostruggle,andIwan ttomakeadifferenceinsomeone'slife.Iwanttob ethatpersonwhohelpssomeoneunderstandad ifficultconcept,whoencouragesthemtokeepg oingevenwhenthingsgettough."

Mr.Harrison'sexpressionsoftened,andhesmile d."Anthony,you'rearemarkableyoungman.You rdesiretohelpothersistrulyinspiring.Ilikethat."

Anthony'smumbeamedwithpride,hereyesshi ningwithtears.

Mr.Harrisoncontinued,"Youknow,Anthony,Iwa sonceinasimilarposition.Iwasstrugglingtomak eendsmeet,butsomeonetookachanceonme,a nditchangedmylife.Iwanttodothesameforyou. "

Anthony'seyeswidenedinanticipationasMr.Har risonmadehisannouncement."Iwillsponsoryou reducation,Anthony,allthewaythrough

university.Andnotjustthat,I'llmakesureyouhave

enoughresourcesyouneedtoexcel.Iwantyoutobecomeateacher,andIwanttobeapartofyourjourney."

Anthonywasoverwhelmedwithemotion.Hecouldn'tbelievewhathewashearing."Thankyou,sir,"hesaid,hisvoiceshakingwithgratitude.

Mr.Harrisonsmiled,hiseyestwinkling."No,Anthony.Thankyou.You'veremindedmeoftheimportanceofgivingback.I'mhonoredtobeapartofyourjourney."

Asthemeetingcametoaclose,Anthonyknewthathislifehadjustchangedinthemostincredibleway.Hehadasponsor,amentor,andaclearpathtoachievinghisdreams.Hewasgoingtobecomeateacher,andhewasgoingtomakeadifferenceinthelivesofothers.

Astheyleftthehotel,theskyhadtransformedintoadeep,forebodinggrey,withcloudsthatseemedtoswirlandtwistineverydirection.Theairwasheavywiththescentofrain,andAnthonycouldfeeltheelectricityinit.Suddenly,theheavensopenedup,

andatorrentialdownpourdrenchedtheminanin stant.

"Ohno,notnow!"Anthony'smumexclaimed,ho ldingherhandbagoverherheadasamakeshiftu mbrella.Mr.Harrisonquicklyusheredthemintot hehotellobby,wheretheyhuddledtogether,wa itingforthestormtopass.

Anthonypacedbackandforth,hisanxietygrowin gwitheverypassingminute.Heknewthathehadt ogetbacktoschool,tofinishthatlastexamandou tstandDarenonceandforall.Buttherainshowed nosignsoflettingup,andAnthonyfeltlikehewast rapped,andlefthelpless.

Asthehourstickedby,Anthony'sfrustrationand desperationgrew.Hefeltliketheuniversewasco nspiringagainsthim,thateverythingwasworkin gagainsthim.HethoughtaboutDaren,sittingint heexamhall,confidentlyansweringquestions,a ndAnthonyfeltasurgeofangeranddeterminatio n.

Butastheminutesturnedintohours,Anthony'sh opebegantodwindle.Heknewthathewould nevermakeitbacktoschoolontime,andthathisc hancetooutstandDarenwasslippingaway.

Asthestormfinallybegantosubside,Anthony's mumputahandonhisshoulder."Let'sgo,Anthony.We'llfiguresomethingout."

ButAnthonyshookheroff,hiseyesfixedonthedoor."No,Mum.Ihavetogonow."

Mr.Harrisonnodded,andtheysetoffintothenight,splashingthroughthepuddlesandracingagainsttheclock.Butastheyarrivedattheschool,Anthony'sheartsank.Theofficeswereclosed,andtheexamhallwasdark.

Anthonyfeltlikehe'dbeenpunchedinthegut.Hestoodthere,frozen,astheraindrippedoffhishairandontohisface.Hecouldn'tbelieveit.Hehadlosthischance.

Withacryoffrustration,Anthonyturnedandrantotheschoolgates,screamingatthetopofhislungs."No!No! No!"Hepoundedhisfistsagainstthemetal,feelingthepainandtheangercoursingthroughhisveins.

HismumandMr.Harrisonrushedafterhim,tryingtocalmhimdown,butAnthonywasbeyondconsolation.Heslidtotheground,hisbackagainsttheg

ate,andletthetearsstreamdownhisface.

"I'veleteveryonedown,"hesobbed."I'veletmyselfdo wn."

Mr.Harrisoncrouchedbesidehim,puttingahan donhisshoulder."Anthony,you'renotafailure. You'rearemarkableyoungmanwithabrightfutu reaheadofyou.Thisisjustasetback.You'renotde finedbyoneexam,oronecompetition.You'rede finedbyyourdreams,yourpassions,andyourdet ermination."

Anthony'smumkneltdownbesidehim,wrappin gherarmsaroundhim."Anthony,sweetie,welo ve younomatterwhat.You'renotinthistowinDaren ,you'reinthistobecomethebestversionofyours elf.You'reinthistofollowyourdreams,tomakea differenceintheworld."

Mr.Harrisonnoddedinagreement."Anthony,Idi dn'tsponsoryoutowinanexam.Isponsoredyout opursueyourpassion,tobecomeateacher,andt omakeapositiveimpactontheworld.Theexamis justasmallpartofyourjourney.Don'tletitdefiney ou."

Anthonysniffled,lookingupathismumandMr.Harrison."ButIfeellikeI'veleteveryonedown,"hesaid,hisvoiceshaking.

Hismumsmiled,wipingawayhistears."Youhaven'tletanyonedown,Anthony.You'veworkedhard,andyou'veachievedsomuchalready.We'reproudofyou,nomatterwhathappensnext."

Mr.Harrisonadded,"Remember,Anthony,it'snotaboutwinningorlosing.It'saboutthejourney,thepeopleyoumeet,andthelessonsyoulearnalongtheway.You'reontherightpath,andI'mheretosupportyoueverystepoftheway."

Anthonytookadeepbreath,feelingasenseof calmwashoverhim.HeknewthathismumandMr.Harrisonwereright.Hedidn'thavetodefeatDarentobeasuccess.Hejusthadtobetruetohimself,andfollowhisdreams.

Thenextmorning,Anthonywokeupearly,feelingamixofemotions.Hewasstillreelingfromthedisappointmentofmissingtheexam,buthewasdeterminedtomakethingsright.Hegotdressedandheadedtotheadministrationoffice,hopingtoexplainhissituationandpleadhiscase.

Ashestoodoutsidetheoffice,hetookadeepbreathandpushedopenthedoor.The administrator,astern-lookingwomanwithaclipboard,lookedupathim. "Yes?WhatcanIdoforyou?"

Anthonyexplainedhissituation,tellingheraboutthestormandthemeetingwithMr.Harrison.Buttheadministratorjustshookherhead,handinghimacopyoftheschoolrulesandregulations."I'mafraidit'snotourpolicytomakeexceptions,Anthony.Youmissedtheexam,andthat'sit."

Anthonyfeltasurgeoffrustrationanddisappointment.Heknewhehadagoodreasonformissingtheexam,butitseemedlikenoonewaswillingtolisten.Helefttheofficefeelingdefeated,wonderingwhathewoulddonext.

Ashewalkedbacktohisdormitory,heranintoBecky,whowassittingonabench,studying.Shelookedupandsawthedisappointmentonhisface."Hey,what'swrong?"sheasked,concernetchedonherface.

Anthonysighted,shakinghishead."Imissedtheexam.Itriedtoexplain,buttheyjustgavemetherulesandregulations."

Becky'sexpressionsoftened,andshereachedou ttoputahandonhisarm."I'msosorry,Anthony. Thatstinks.Butit'snottheendoftheworld,okay? You'llgetanotherchance."

Anthonyshookhishead,feelinglikehewaslettin geveryonedown."Idoubtit.I'mnoteveninthetop teninclass.IjustfeellikeI'mgoodfornothing."

Beckylookedathim,hereyesshiningwithkindne ss."Anthony,you'resomuchmorethanyourgrad es.You'resmart,andyou'recapable.Andyou'ren otalone.I'mhereforyou,okay?"

Anthonyfeltalumpforminhisthroatashelooked atBecky.Shewasbeingsokindandsupportive,a ndhefeltgratefultohaveherasafriend.

"Thanks,Becky,"hesaid,hisvoiceshaking."That meansalottome."

Beckysmiled,givinghisarmasqueeze."Anytime ,Anthony.Now,let'sgogetsomebreakfast,okay ?Wecanfigurethingsouttogether."

Astheywalkedtothecafeteria,Anthonyfelt asenseofhopethathehadn'tfeltinalongtim

e.

Maybethingswouldn'tbeokay,butwithBecky'ss upport,hefeltlikehecouldfacewhatevercamen ext.

Atthecafeteria,AnthonyanxiouslylookedatBec kyinstantly.Beckyinquisitivelyaskedhim,“Isth ereanythingyouwanttotellme.”

AnthonynoddedinacceptanceandthenBeckys aidtohim,“Youhavemyears”“Goon”sheadded .

AnthonythoughtandfailedtoaccepttotellBeck ywhathewantedtotellhimhejustsaid,“Iamglad tohaveyouasafriendandpleasedon'teverleave myside”

“Youdidn'thavetoaskthatbecauseIhavenohop esoflettingyougoinanytimetocome.”Sheadde d.

“Okay,let'sgoonandeat.Iknowyouarehungrya ndyouhaveulcerssoitwouldbegoodforyourwell beingtoday.Ihopeso”Anthonysaid. AnthonyandBeckyhadanicemomenttogether thattimeandbothneverwantedtoleaveeachot her'ssightbythenyettheyhadto.

Theshockingnews

Anthony'slifewasabouttotakeanotherdramatic turn.Hewassittinginthedormitory,lostinthough t,

whenhisphonerang.ItwasMr.Harrison,hisspon sor.

"Anthony,Ihavesomenews,"Mr.Harrisonsaid,hi svoicefilledwithexcitement."I'vemanagedtoge tyoutransferredtoabetterschool,onethat'smor esuitedtoyourneedsandabilities."

Anthony'sjawdropped."What?Really?"

"Yes,really,"Mr.Harrisonlaughed."You'll beleavingnextweek.I'vealreadyspokent otheadministration,andthey'reexpectin gyou."

Anthonywasoverjoyed.Hecouldn'tbelievehislu ck.Hewouldbeleavingthisschool,withitsstrictr ulesandregulations,behind.Hewouldbestartin gfresh,withanewchancetomakeanameforhim self.

Butashehungupthephone,hefeltapangofsadn ess.Hewouldbeleavinghisfriendsbehind,Becky ,Joan,andtheothers.Hewouldmissthem,especi allyBecky.

Anthonydecidedtotellhisfriendsabouthis transfer.Hestartedwiththeschoolboysinhis

dormitory,Daren,andtheothers.Darenwassurprised,buthappyforAnthony.

"Congratulations,man,"Darensaid,shakingAnthony'shand."Iknewyouhaditinyou."

Anthonysmiled,feelingasenseofgratitudetowardsDaren."Thanks,Daren.I'mgoingtomissyouguys,though."

Joan,theReligiousprefect,wasagoodfriendofAnthony's.ShehadbefriendedhimonhisfirstSundayinschool,andtheyhadbecomeclose.ShecriedwhensheheardaboutAnthony'stransfer,butsheencouragedhimtoseeitasanewopportunity.

"Anthony,I'msoproudofyou,"Joansaid,hugginghimtightly."Rememberwhyyoucametoschool,anddon'tletanythingdistractyou.Norelationships,okay?You'renotreadyforthem."

Anthonynodded,feelingasenseofgratitudetowardsJoan.Shewasright,hewasn'treadyforrelationships.Hehadbiggergoalstoachieve.

AnthonywalkedtoBecky'sdormitory,feelingnervous.Hehadwrittenapoemforher,andhewas

hopingshewouldlikeit.Heknockedonthedoor,a
ndBeckyanswered,asmileonherface.

"Hey,Anthony,"shesaid,hereyessparkling."W
hat'sup?"

Anthonyhandedherthepaper,hisheartracing."I
wrotesomethingforyou,"hesaid,feelingabitem
barrassed.

Beckytookthepaper,hereyesscanningtheword
s.Anthonywatchedher,hisheartpoundinginhisc
hest.Hehadputhisheartandsoulintothatpoem,
andhewashopingshewouldlikeit.

Beckylookedupathim,hereyesshiningwithtea
rs."Iloveit,"shewhispered.

Anthonysmiled,feelingasenseofhappiness."I'
mgladyoulikeit,"hesaid.

Thetwoexchangedcontacts,andAnthonyknew
hewouldstayintouchwithBecky,nomatterwher
elifetookthem.

AsAnthonywalkedoutoftheschoolgates,hefelta
mixofemotionsswirlinginsidehim.Hewasexcite
dforthenewadventurethatawaitedhimathisne

W

school,butapartofhimwassadtoleavehisfriend sbehind.Hehadgrownattachedtothepeoplean dtheplace,anditwashardtosaygoodbye.

Ashelookedbackattheschool,hesawBeckystan dingatthegate,asmallsmileonherface.Hewalk edtowardsher,andtheyhuggedtightly.

"I'mgoingtomissyou,"Beckywhispered,hervoicetre mbling.

"I'mgoingtomissyoutoo,"Anthonyreplied,hisv oicecracking.

Theystoodthereforamoment,holdingontoeac hother,notwantingtoletgo.Finally,Anthonypu lledback,lookingintoBecky'seyes.

"Let'sstayintouch,okay?"hesaid,hisvoicefille dwithemotion.

Beckynodded,smiling."Definitely.I'llbewaiting foryourcall."

Anthonysmiled,feelingasenseofhope.Hekne wthatthiswasn'ttheend,thattheywouldstayin

touch,andmaybe,justmaybe,theirfriendshipw
ouldblossomintosomethingmore.

Asheturnedtoleave,AnthonysawJoanstanding
nearby,watchingthemwithaknowingsmile.He
walkedtowardsher,andtheyhugged.

"Takecareofyourself,Anthony,"Joansaid,he
rvoicesoft."Andremember,don'tforgetwhy
youcametoschool."

Anthonynodded,feelingasenseofgratitudetow
ardsJoan.Heknewthathewouldalwayscarryher
wordswithhim,andthathewouldmakeherproud
.

Ashewalkedawayfromtheschool,Anthonyfelta
senseofexcitementandanticipation.Hewasrea
dyforthenextchapterofhislife,andheknewthat
nomatterwherehewent,hewouldalwayscarryhi
sfriendsandmemorieswithhim.

ThesunwasshiningbrightlyasAnthonywalkeda
wayfromtheschool,asenseofhopeandpromisefi
llinghisheart.Heknewthatthefuturewasbright,a
ndthathewasreadytotakeonwhatevercamenex
t.

Anthony'smumwaswaitingforhimatthegate, abigsmileonherface."Howwasit,sweetie?"sheasked,hugginghimtightly.

"Itwastough,Mum,"Anthonyreplied,smiling."ButI'mreadyforthis."

Hismumnodded,hereyesshiningwithpride. "Iknowyouare,Anthony.You'regoingtodogreatthings."

Anthonysmiled,feelingasenseofgratitudetowardshismum.Heknewthatshehadalwaysbelievedinhim,andthathewouldmakeherproud.

Astheywalkedawayfromtheschool,Anthony knewthatthiswasjustthebeginningofhisjourney.Hewasexcitedtoseewhatthefutureheld,and hewasreadytotakeonwhatevercamenext.

Anthonyclosedhiseyesandimaginedathimself withnoteofsongsinhishead“Iambetterthanwho IthinkIamandIdon'thavetoonlyfocusonwinning orcarryingtheclassonmyshoulders”

“IambetterthanwhatIthinkIcanbe,”hesaidtohimself.“Ijusthavetobelieveinmyselfasastrong

personwhoknowswhathereallywants.”Headde dstillinhisthoughts.

Hefeltrelievedandreadytomoveontothenextp ointthoughitwasatrialmoment..

Thechemistryof hearts

Beckyunfoldedthenoteassoonasshereached home,hereyesscanningtheunevenlines: ***”Ro***

sesarered,
Violetsareblue,

I’dtradeeveryrankingtositnexttoyou."

Shepulledittoherchest,feelingaflutterinher chest.Thewordsseemedtodanceonthepage ,fillingherwithamixofemotions.

Butasshestood,lostintheemotions,herfather's voiceslitheredin,likeasnakeinthegrass:"Distr actionsdrowndreams."Shewinced,thewordsw erelike
splashofreality.Sheknewwhathemeantwell,bu tsometimeshiswordsfeltlikeaweightonhersho ulders,holdingherback.

Shetuckedthepoemintoherpocket,tryingtosha keoffthefeelingofuncertainty.Shedidn'tknoww hattodo,butsheknewshecouldn'tletherfeeling sbeadistractionofhergoals.

WhenshehandedthepoembacktoAnthony,hiss milecrumpledlikethepage.Beckyfeltapangofgu ilt,butshedidn'tknowwhatelsetodo.Shedidn'tw anttohurthim,butshehadtoprioritizeherstudies
.

AnthonyandBeckytextedeachother,tryingtom aintaintheirfriendship.Butthetensionwaspalpa ble,andBeckyeventuallytoldAnthonythat

sheonlysawhimasafriend.Notbecauseshedid n'tfeelthesameway,butbecauseofherfather's words.

BeckynevermeanttohurtAnthony.Shehadseen thewayhelookedather,likeshehungthestars,a nditmadeherfeellikeshewasfloatingonair.Buth erfather'swordsechoedinhermind:"Focuson yourgoals,notboys."

Thatnight,shetuckedthepoemunderherpillow, wonderingiflovewasadistractionoracompass.S hehadalwaysthoughtitwasaweakness,someth ingthatwouldholdherback.Butasshelaythere,f eelingthepaperagainstherskin,shewasn'tsosu re.

Anthonywasheartbroken,butheacceptedherd ecision.HecalledJoan,hisvoiceshakingashetold herwhathadhappened.Joanlistened,hervoicef ullofcompassion.

"Anthony,I'msosorry,"shesaid."Butyou'renota lone.You'reloved,andyou'reworthyoflove.Justr ememberthat."

Anthonytookadeepbreath,tryingtoletgoofthep ain.HeknewJoanwasright,butitwashardtoshak eoffthefeelingofrejection.

Ashehungupthephone,hefeltasenseofdetermi nation.Hewouldmoveon,hewouldheal.Hewoul dfocusonhisstudies,onbecomingthebestversio nofhimself.

Becky,ontheotherhand,wasstrugglingtoshake offthefeelingofwhat-ifs.Shewonderedifshehadmadeamistake,ifshe hadletherfearholdherback.

Asthedayswentby,AnthonyandBecky'spathscr ossedlessandless.Butthememoryofthatpoem, ofthatmoment,lingered,abittersweet reminderofwhatcouldhavebeen. Andinthesilence,theybothwondered:whatif?

Thechemistryofheartswasacomplexthing,fullo fdistractions,twistsandturns.Butonethingwasc ertain,itwasajourneyworthtaking.

AsBeckylayinbed,shecouldn'thelpbutthinkab outAnthony.Shewonderedwhathewasdoing,if hewasthinkingofhertoo.Shefeltapangof

regret,butsheknewshehadmadetherightdecision.
Orhadshe?Onlytimewouldtell.
Astheweeksturnedintomonths,Beckyfoundherselflostinherthoughts,hermindwanderingbacktoAnthonyandthepoemhehadwrittenher.Shewouldcatchherselfsmiling,rememberingthewayhelookedather,thewayhemadeherfeel.
Sheknewshehadmadeadecision,butshecouldn'thelpbutwonderwhatcouldhavebeenifshehadtakenachance.

Asthememoriesfloodedhermind,Becky'sheartachedwithamixofsadnessandlonging.ShewishedshecouldturnbacktimetotellAnthony howshetrulyfelt.Butlifedidn'tworkthatway,andshehadmadeherchoice.Shetookadeepbreath,tryingtoshakeoffthewhat-ifs,andfocusedonthepresent.Sheknewshehadtomoveforward,butapartofherwouldalwayswonderwhatcouldhavebeen.

TheNewHorizons

Anthonysteppedoutofthecrowdedschoolcorridor,hiseyesscanningtheunfamiliar

surroundings.Thescentoffreshlycutgrassand worntextbooksfilledhisnostrils,amixofexcitementandnervesswirlinginhisstomach.Hehad alwaysbeenthequiettype,preferringtostickto hisonlinecommunitiesandbooks,buthisparentshadinsistedonafreshstart.

Justashewasstartingtofeellikehe'dneverfindhisfooting,afamiliarfaceappearedinthecrowd." Eric!"Anthony'seyeslitup,agrinspreadingacrosshisface.

Eric,hisfriendfromtheonlinequiz,grinnedback, clappinghimontheback."Yo,Anthony! Welcometothemadhouse."Eric'senthusiasm wasinfectious,puttingAnthonyatease.

EricshowedAnthonyaroundtheschool,pointingoutthebestspotstograbasnackandthemostlenientteachers.Theynavigatedthemaze-likecorridors,dodgingstudentsrushingtotheir nextclass.Astheymoved,EricregaledAnthony withstoriesabouttheirnewclassmates,sharing juicygossipandmakingAnthonylaugh.

Astheyenteredthecafeteria,Ericgesturedtoagroupofstudentssittingatatable."That'sthe

crew,"hesaid,introducingAnthonytohisnewfriends.

TherewasRachel,theoutspokenartist;Jamie,thecharmingmusician;andMei,thequietgeniuswhowasapparentlyamathwhiz.TheywelcomedAnthonywithopenarms,makingspaceforhimatthetable.

Anthonyfoundhimselfrelaxing,feelinglikehe'dfinallyfoundatribe.Overlunch,theychattedabouteverythingfrommusictomemes,andAnthonydiscoveredtheysharedaloveforthesameobscurebands.

Asthelunchbellrang,signalingtheendofthebreak,Ericleanedin."Hey,we'rehavingapoetryslamtonightattheschoolauditorium.Youin?"

Anthony'sheartskippedabeat.Poetrywashisthing,buthe'dneverperformedinfrontofacrowdbefore.Eric'sencouragingnodpushedhimtotaketheleap."Yeah,I'min."
Thegroupcheered,andAnthonyfeltasparkofexcitement.Maybethisnewschoolwasn'tgoingtobesobadafterall.

Astheypartedways,EricHandedAnthonyaflyer forthepoetryslam."Seeyoutonight,man."

Anthonytuckedtheflyerintohispocket,asense ofbelongingsettlingin.Hehadafeelingthiswasj usttheGenesisofsomethingbig.

Thisnewschoolwasalreadyshapinguptobeabr eathoffreshaircomparedtohisoldone.Thestud entsseemedfriendlier,theteachersmoresupp ortive,andthevibemorechill.Anthonycouldn't waittoseewhatthefutureprepared.

AsAnthonymadehiswaytohisnextclas s,hecouldn'thelpbutnoticethevibrantart workadorningthewalls,thesoundofmusi cdriftingfromthemusicroom,andthelau ghterechoingfromthecourtyard.Itwaslik etheGenesisasalive,pulsingwithcreativi tyandenergy.

TheRisingfrom Ashes

Anthony'sdeterminationtomakethe

mostofhisnewschoolwaspalpable.Het hrewhimselfintohisstudies,joiningclu bsand

organizationsthatalignedwithhisinterests.Heauditionedfortheschoolplay,andtohissurprise,helandedasaleadrole.Therushofadrenalineashesteppedontothestage,theroarofapplausefromtheaudience,andthesenseofaccomplishmentwhenthecurtainfellwereallintoxicating.

Ashesettledintohisnewschool,Anthonyrealizedthathehadlearntavaluablelesson,thatrejectionisnottheendoftheworld,andthattherearealwaysnewopportunitieswaitingforhim.HerememberedthepoemhehadwrittenforBecky,theonethathadbeenmetwithsilenceandrejection.Hehadpouredhisheartandsoulintothosewords,andithadbeendevastatingtohavethemfallflat.Butnow,hesawthatitwasjustasteppingstonetobiggerandbetterthings.

Anthony'sstorywasoneofperseveranceanddetermination.Despitefacingnumerouschallenges,henevergaveup,andhe

eventuallyfoundsuccessandhappines s.Hebecamearegularattheschool'spoet ryslams,wherehewouldrecitehisoriginal piecestoacrowdofenthusiasticstudents. Hejoinedthedebateteam,wherehedisco veredatalentofpublicspeaking.Andheev enstartedablog,wherehewroteabouthis experiencesandsharedhispoetrywitha wideraudience.

AsAnthony'sconfidenceincreased,so didhispopularity.Hebecameafixtureint heschool'ssocialscene,attendingconce rts,plays,andotherevents.Hemadenew friends,whoknewandacceptedhimforw hohewas,notlikeinhispastwherehe'dhe artbreak,andhecaughttheattentionofhi steachers,whorecognizedhisoutstandi ngperformanceinschoolactivitiesandac ademicexcellence.

Oneday,Anthonywasapproachedbyth eschool'sstudentcouncilpresident,acha rismaticseniornamedSarah."Anthony,

we'rehavingatalentshownextweek,andwewantyoutoperform,"shesaid,hereyesshiningwithenthusiasm."You'vegotagift,andwewanttoshowcaseit."

Anthonywashesitantatfirst,butSarah'senthusiasmwasinfectious.Heagreedtopresent,andonthenightofthetalentshow,hetookthestage,hisheartpoundinginhischest.Herecitedanoriginalpoem,onethatspokeouthisjourneyandhisgrowth.Thecrowderuptedinapplause,andAnthonyfeltasenseofprideandaccomplishmentwashoverhim.

Aftertheshow,Sarahapproachedhim,ahugesmileonherface."Anthony,thatwasamazing!"shesaid,handinghimatrophy."You'reastar,andwe'reluckytohaveyouhere."

Anthonybeamed,feelinglikehehadfinallyfoundhisplace.Heknewthathestillhadalongwaytogo,buthewasexcitedfo

rthe

journeythatwasawaiting.Hehadrisenfromtheashes,andhewasreadytotakeontheworld.

Ashewalkedoutoftheauditorium,Anthonyfeltasenseofclosurewithhispast.Hehadfacedhisfears,andhehadcomeoutontop.Hewasnolongerthesamepersoneveryoneknewbefore,andhewasgratefulforthejourneythathadbroughthimtothismoment.

TheSideHustle

Anthony'stutoringsessionswithMariaquicklybecamethehighlightofhisday.He

wouldmeetherduringlunch,andtogether,theywouldtacklealgebrawitharhythmthatwasalltheirown.Heturnedequationsintocatchytunes,andMaria'sgradesbegantosoar.Butitwasn'tjustaboutthegrades–itwasaboutbuildingconfidence.

AsMariaacedhertest,shegavehimabraceletwovenfromthread,hereyesshiningwithgratitude."Nowyou'restuckwithus,"shegrinned,andAnthonyfeltasenseofbelonging.

Wordsspread,andsoon,morejuniorswereknockingonhisdoor,seekinghelpwithmathorpoetryorjustneedingsomeonetotalkto.Anthonyobliged,usinghisfreetimetotutorandmentorhispeers.Heearnedareputationasthego-toguyforstrugglingstudents,andhisunofficialfanclubgrew.

ButAnthony'smotivationswentbeyondjustbeingpopular.Hewantedtoprovet

ohimselfthathewasmorethanjustapoet

–

hewasaleader,ateacher,anda problem-solver.Andheneededthemoneytofund hisprojects,toshowhismumthathewasresponsible,thathedidn'tneedherhard-earnedcashtochasehisdreams.

Anthony'smumhadworkedtirelesslytoprovideforhim,sacrificingherowndreamstogivehimabetterlife.Herememberedthecountlessnightsshespenthunched overhersewingmachine,stitchingtogethergarmentsfortheexportmarket.Herememberedthewayshe'dsmile,hereyestiredbutproud,whenhebroughthomegoodgradesorshowedherhislatestpoem.

Hedidn'twanttostressherout,askingformoneyfor"irrelevantprojects"assomepeopleoccasionallysaid.So,hetookonmorestudents,usinghisearningstofundhispassions.Hestartedasmallpoetryzine,publishingtheworkofhispeersandsellingitatschoolevents.Heevenlandedafewgigs

performingatlocalcafes,hispoetry

drawingincrowdsandearninghimafew shillings.

Anthony'ssidehustlebecamehisthera py,awaytochannelhisenergyandcreativ ityintosomethingpositive.Andashelook edaroundattheseaoffaces,heknewhew asmakingadifference,oneequation,one poem,oneconversationatatime.

Oneafternoon,ashewastutoringagro upoffreshmen,theschoolprincipal,Mr.Kr est,pokedhisheadintotheroom."Anthon y,gotaminute?"

Anthonynodded,wonderingwhatwasu p.Mr.Krestsmiled,hiseyescrcrklingwitha pproval."I'veheardgreatthingsaboutyou rtutoring,Anthony.You'remakingareali mpacthere.Keepupthegoodwork."

Anthonybeamed,feelinglikehe'djustb eengivenabadgeofhonor.Heknewhewa sontherightpath,usinghisgiftstoupliftot

hers

andbuildabrighterfuture–oneequation,onepoem,oneconversationatatime.

AshewatchedMr.Krestwalkaway,Anthonyfeltasenseofprideandpurpose.Hewasnolongerjustajunior,strugglingtofindhisplace.Hewasaleader,ateacher,andaforcetobereckonedwith.

Astheweekswentby,Anthony'ssidehustlecontinuedtoflourish.Hestartedapoetryclub,wherestudentscouldcomeandsharetheirworkinasafeandsupportiveenvironment.Heevenlandedafewcommissions,writingpoemsforspecialoccasionslikebirthdaysandgraduations.

Andthroughitall,Anthony'smumwashisbiggestcheerleader,beamingwithprideateveryperformanceandmilestone.She'dtellherfriendsandfamilyabouthersson,thepoet,andAnthonycouldseetheprideinhereyes.Itwasafeelingunlikeanyother,knowingthathewasmakinghersacrifices

worthit.

Anthony'sconfidencegrewwitheachp
assingday,andhebegantoseetheworldi
nadifferentlight.Herealizedthathedidn't
havetowaitforopportunitiestocometohi
m–
hecouldcreatehisown.Hestartedbrainst
ormingideasforacommunityproject,so
methingthatwouldbringpeopletogether
andmakeapositiveimpactonthecommu
nity.Theseedhadbeenplanted,andAnth
onywaseagertoseeitgrow.

AsAnthonywalkedhomefromschoolo
neday,hestoppedbythelocalmarketan
dsawagroupofstreetkidsgatheredarou
ndamakeshiftstage.Theywereperformi
ngaskit,andAnthonywasimpressedbyt
heircreativityandenergy.

TheAnthonyPro

jects

Anthony'sprojectswereanextensionofhimself–areflectionofhispassionforwriting.Hehadstartedapoetryzine,"TheMuse,"whichfeaturedtheworkofhispeers

andwasahitamongthestudents.Hehadalsobegunwritingcommissions,craftingpoemsforspecialoccasionslikebirthdaysandgraduations.

ButAnthony'smostambitiousprojecttodatewasthe"WordsonWalls"initiative.Hehadgottenpermissionfromtheschooladministrationtopaintmuralswithinspiringquotesandpoemsonthewallsoftheschool.Itwasawaytobringartandliteraturetogether,andtocreateasenseofcommunity.

Anthonyspenthoursbrainstormingideas,writingpoems,anddesigningthemurals.Herecruitedateamofvolunteers,includingMaria,thejuniorhehadtutoredinalgebra,andSarah,thestudentcouncilpresidentwhohadaskedhimtorunforoffice.

Together,theysettowork,paintingvibrantmuralsthatreflectedtheschool'svaluesandspirit.

Thewallsoftheschoolbegantotransform,becomingacanvasforAnthony'swords. Quotesfromfamouspoetsandwritersadornedthehallways,alongsideoriginalpoemswrittenbyAnthonyandhisteam.TheprojectwasahugesuccessandAnthony'sreputationasatalentedwriterandleaderspreadthroughouttheschool.

Hewasproudofwhathehadaccomplished,andheknewthathisprojectsweremakingadifferenceinthelivesofthosearoundhim.Ashewalkedthroughthehallways,hesawstudentsstoppingtoreadthewordsonthewalls,theirfaceslightingupwithinspirationandmotivation.AsAnthonylookedatthewalls,nowadornedwithhiswords,hefeltasenseofsatisfaction.Hehadfoundhisvoice,andhewasusingittomakeapositiveimpactontheworldaroundhim.Heknewthathestillhadalongwaytogo,buthewasexcitedforthejourneyahead,andthestorieshewouldtellalongtheway.

The"WordsonWalls"initiativehadalso sparkedanewsenseofcreativityamongthestudents.TheybegantoapproachAnthonywiththeirownideas,askingforhelp withwritinganddesigningtheirownprojects.Anthonywashappytooblige,andsoon,theschoolwasbuzzingwithactivity,as studentsworkedontheirownpassionprojects,inspiredbyAnthony'sexample.

Theschool'sannualpoetrycompetition wasjustaroundthecorner,andAnthonywasbusyjudgingsubmissions.Hewaslookingforwardtohearingtheyoungpoetssharetheirwork,andheknewthatitwasgoingtobeatoughcompetition.

TheUnbreakableBond

Agathasatonthegrass,hereyesfixedonAnthonyasheplayedwiththejunior

students.Shewaslostinthought,agentl esmileonherface.Anthony,noticingherg aze,approachedherwithacuriousexpres sion."Hey,what'sup? Whythestare?"heasked,ploppingdownb esideher.

Agatha'seyessparkledasshereplied,"I 'mjustadmiringthewaythejuniorstudent slookwhenthey'rehappy.Youhaveagift, Anthony."

Anthonychuckled,feelingasenseofpride." Thanks,IguessIdohaveawaywithkids."

Astheytalked,AnthonyandAgathadis coveredtheysharedapassionforhelping others.Theystartedmeetingregularly,b rainstormingwaystosupportthejuniorst udentsandpromotetheiracademicsucc ess.

Theirfriendshipgrewstrongerwitheac hpassingday.Theywereinseparable,alw

aystogether,whetherinclass,atlunch,or

duringextracurricularactivities.Peoplebegantonotice,andwhispersstartedcirculatingthattheyweremorethanjustfriends.

ButAnthonyandAgathadidn'tcare.Theyknewtheirbondwasspecial,aconnectionthatwentbeyondromance.Theywereeachother'srock,supportingandencouragingeachotherineverythingtheydid.

Oneday,theyweresummonedtotheadministrationoffice,suspectedofcoupling.Anthonygrinnedmischievouslyastheywalkedin,handinhand."What'stheproblem,sir?"heasked,feigninginnocence.

Theprincipalsighed,shakinghishead."Youtwoarealwaystogether.Peoplearestartingtotalk."

Agathasmiledsweetly."We'rejustfriends,sir.Weshareapassionforhelpingothers."

Theprincipalraisedaneyebrow."I'mno tsureIbelievethat."

Anthonychuckled."It'sthetruth,sir.We 'rejustreallygoodfriends."

Theprincipalshookhishead,laughing." Well,keepitprofessional,okay?"

AnthonyandAgathanodded,grinning, andlefttheoffice,armsaroundeachother' sshoulders.

Astheywalkedbacktoclass,Agathatur nedtoAnthony."Youknow,I'mgladwe'ref riends."

Anthonysmiled."Metoo,Agatha.Metoo."

Theysharedalaugh,theirbondstronge rthanever.

Inclass,theysattogether,exchanging notesandwhispers.Theirteacher,Mrs.

Okonkwo,smiled,watchingthem."Thosetwoaresomethingspecial,"shesaidtothestudentteacher.

Thestudentteachernodded,smiling."They'reagreatteam."

AnthonyandAgatha'sfriendshipcontinuedtoflourish,abeaconofhopeandsupportintheschoolcommunity.

Theirfriendshipwasabeautifulthing,anditseemedlikenothingcouldevercomebetweenthem,astheycontinuedtosupportandencourageeachotherinalltheirendeavors.

TheComplicatedFeelings

Anthony'spopularityinschoolhadbecomeoverwhelming.Hewastiredofbeingthecenterofattention,tiredofpeoplealwayswantingsomethingfromhim.Hejustwantedtobeleftalone,tofocusonhisstudiesandhispart-timejob.HehadpromisedhisfriendJoanthathewouldn'tgetinvolvedinanyromanticrelationshipsuntilhefeltready,andhewasdeterminedtokeepthatpromise.

Butitseemedlikefatehadotherplans.Ashley,asweetandfriendlygirl,hadalwaysnoticedAnthonyfromafar.Shewouldseehiminthecafeteria,surroundedbyhisfriends,andshewouldadmirehimfromadistance.Oneday,shewouldmusterupthecouragetoapproachhimandstrikeupaconversation.

"HeyAnthony,how'sitgoing?"Ashleyasked,tryingtosoundcasual.

Anthonywastakenabackby Ashley'sfriendlydemeanor,buthewaspolite."Hey Ashley,I'mgood.Justgrabbingsomelunch."

AshleysmiledandsatdownnexttoAnthony."DoyoumindifIjoinyou?"sheasked.

Anthonywassurprised,buthecouldn't sayno."Notatall,"hesaid,tryingtosoundfriendly.

Astheytalked,Ashleyfoundherselfenjoying Anthony'scompany.Hewaseasytotalkto,andtheyhadalotincommon.

Theydiscoveredtheybothlovedwritingandreadingnovels,andtheirconversationflowedeffortlessly.

Overthenextfewweeks,AshleyandAnthonybecameclosefriends.Theywouldsittogetherinclass,studytogether,andevengrablunchtogethersometimes.

AnthonywasgratefulforAshley'sfriendship,andhestartedtolookforwardtoseeinghereveryday.

Butastheyspentmoretimetogether,Ashleystartedtodevelopfeelingsfor Anthony.Shewouldcatchherselfstaringathim,andshewouldfeelherheartskipabeatwheneverhesmiledather.Shetriedtobrushoffherfeelings,tellingherselfshewasjustbeingsilly,buttheyonlygrewstronger.

Anthony,ontheotherhand,wasobliviousto Ashley'sfeelings.Hethoughtofherasjustafriend,andhehadnoideashewassilentlydevelopingacrushonhim.

AsAshley'sfeelingscontinuedtogrow,shestartedtobecomemoreandmoreattachedtoAnthony.Shewouldcallhimnonstop,askinghimtohangout,andevenshowingupathisfavoritecoffeeshop.Anthonystartedfeelinguncomfortable,andhedidn't

knowhowtotellherthathedidn'tfeelth esameway.

Oneday,AnthonyconfidedinEricabou tAshley'sbehavior."Dude,she'scalling menonstop,"Anthonysaid,exasperated ."Idon'tknowwhattodo."

Ericshrugged."Justtellheryou'renotin terested."

ButAnthonycouldn'tbringhimselftodo it.Hedidn'twanttohurtAshley'sfeelings, andhedidn'twanttoloseherfriendship.

Asthedayswentby,Ashley'sfeelingso nlygrewstronger.Shestartedtofindexcu sestotouchAnthony'sarmorshoulder,an dshewouldcatchherselfstaringathimforl ongperiodsoftime.Anthonystartedtofee ltrapped,andhedidn'tknowhowtoescap e.

Ashley'sconstantcallsandtextsstarte

dtotakeatollonAnthony'sstudiesand

part-
timejob.Hewasgettingannoyed,andhed
idn'tknowhowtotellhertobackoff.

Oneday,AshleyshowedupatAnthony'
sfavoritecoffeeshop,uninvited.Anthony
wastakenaback,andhedidn'tknowwhatt
odo.

"Hey,Anthony,"Ashleysaid,smiling."Ij
usthappenedtobeinthearea,andIthough
tI'dstopby."

Anthonyforcedasmile."Hey,Ashley.W
hatbringsyouhere?"

Ashley'ssmilefaltered,andshelooked
atAnthonywithamixtureofsadnessandd
esperation."Ijustwantedtoseeyou,"shes
aid,hervoicebarelyaboveawhisper.

Anthonyfeltapangofguilt,butheknew
hehadtobehonestwithher.Hejustdidn'tk
nowhow.

Anthony'smindwasracing,tryingtothinkofawaytoletAshleydowngently.Hedidn'twanttohurtherfeelings,butheknewhecouldn'tleadheron.Hetookadeepbreath,tryingtogatherhisthoughts,butbeforehecouldsayanything,Ashleyspokeup.

"IknowI'vebeenbotheringyoulately,"shesaid,hervoicecracking."I'msorryifI'vebeentooclattached.Ijust...Ireallylikeyou,Anthony."

Anthony'sheartsank,andhedidn'tknowwhattosay.HelookedatAshley,seeingthehopeandvulnerabilityinhereyes,andheknewhehadtobehonestwithher.Buthow?

TheGameofHear

ts

Anthony'spopularityinschoolhadbecomeoverwhelming.Hewastiredofbeingthecenterofattention,tiredofpeoplealwayswantingsomethingfromhim.Hejustwantedtobeleftalone,tofocusonhisstudiesandhispart-timejob.HehadpromisedhisfriendJoanthathewouldn'tgetinvolvedinanyromanticrelationshipsuntilhefeltready,andhewasdeterminedtokeepthatpromise.

Butitseemedlikefatehadotherplans.Ashley,asweetandfriendlygirl,hadalwaysnoticedAnthonyfromafar.Shewouldseehiminthecafeteria,surroundedbyhisfriends,andshewouldadmirehimfromadistance.Oneday,shemusteredupthecouragetoapproachhimandstrikeupaconversation.

Anthony,feelingtrapped,cameupwithaplantopretendtobeinterestedinothergirls,makeAshleyjealous,andshewouldmoveon.Hestartedbybefriending

Amanda,aquietandreservedgirlinhis class.Heaskedheroutonadate,andtohis surprise,sheagreed.Theywentforlunch together,andAnthonymadesuretoleav eAshleybehind,knowingshehadtofinish herassignments.

Amandawasthrilledtobespendingtim ewithAnthony,andshecouldn'thelpbutf eelaflutterinherchestwhenhesmiledath er.Anthony,ontheotherhand,wasplayin gitcool,tryingtokeephistrueintentionshi dden.Theytalkedabouteverythingfromt heirfavoritebookstotheirchildhoodmem ories,andAnthonymadesuretomakeherf eellikeshewastheonlypersonintheworld .

Astheyfinishedtheirlunch,Anthonywa lkedAmandabacktoclass,makingsureto holdthedooropenforherandsmileathera stheysaidgoodbye.Amandacouldn'thel pbutfeellikeshewaswalkingoncloudnine ,

andAnthonycouldn'thelpbutfeelapan gofguiltforusingher.

WithMinnie,heplayedthe"brokenhear t"card,tellingherhehadjustbrokenupwit hhisgirlfriendandneededsomeonetotalk to.Minnie,beingtheempatheticpersonsh ewas,fellforitandstartedcomfortinghim.

Anthonypretendedtoopenuptoher,sh aringhis"deepestsecrets"andmakinghe rfeelspecial.Theyspenthourstalkingont hephone,andAnthonymadesuretomake herfeellikeshewastheonlypersonwhoco uldunderstandhim.

WithAmilia,hepretendedtobeabook worm,askingherforadviceonwhatbook storead.Amilia,beingabooklover,wasth rilledtoshareherknowledgewithAnthon yandstartedrecommendingbookstohi m.Theyspenthoursdiscussingliterature andpoetry,andAnthonymadesuretoma keherfeellikeshewastheonly

personintheworldwhocouldappreciatehisloveforbooks.

AndwithAlika,heplayedthe"mystery" card,tellingherhewasworkingona top-secretprojectandneededherhelptodecodeamessage.Alika,beingacuriousperson,wasintriguedandstartedworkingwithAnthonytocrackthecode.Theyspenthoursporingoverencryptedmessagesandwhisperingsecretstoeachother,andAnthonymadesuretomakeherfeellikeshewaspartofanexclusiveclub.

AsAnthonycontinuedtojugglemultiplegirls,hestartedtofeelguiltyaboutwhathewasdoing.Heknewhewasleadingthemon,andhedidn'tknowhowtostop.Buthewasdeterminedtoseehisplanthrough, nomatterthecost.

Anthony'splanwassetinmotion,andhewasabouttofindoutifitwouldworkorback

fire.Hewasplayingwithfire,andhe

knewit,buthecouldn'thelphimself.He wasaddictedtotheattention,andhewasw illingtodowhateverittooktokeepit.

Butashelookedaroundatthegirlshewa splaying,hecouldn'thelpbutfeelapangof guilt.Washereallywillingtohurtthemallj usttogetAshley'sattention? Onlytimewouldtell.

Asthedayswentby,Anthony'srelations hipswiththegirlscontinuedtogrowstrong er,butheknewitwasallalie.Hewaslivinga doublelife,andhedidn'tknowhowmuchlo ngerhecouldkeepitup.Thepressurewas building,andAnthonyknewhewasinforar udeawakening.

AsAnthonywalkedthroughtheschoolh allways,hefeltlikehewaswalkingonthini ce.Hewaswaitingfortheothershoetodro p,waitingforsomeonetodiscoverhisplan andexposehimforthefakehewas.

Butfornow,hewouldcontinuetoplaythe

game,andhopethathewouldn'tgetcaught.

Anthony'sphonebuzzedinhispocket,andhepulleditouttoseeamessagefromAmanda."Hey,what'sup?"sheasked,her messagereadinglikeaninnocentquestion,butAnthonyknewbetter.Hesmiledtohimself,feelingasenseofsatisfaction.Thegamewasstillon,andhewaswinning.

AsAnthonytypedoutaresponsetoAmanda,hecouldn'thelpbutfeelasenseofunease.Hewasgettingindeeperanddeeper,andhedidn'tknowhowtogetout.Buthewasdeterminedtoseeitthrough,nomatterthecost.Hehitsend,andwaitedforthenextmove,wonderingwhatwouldhappennext.

TheWebofDeceit

Anthony'splanwasworking,butitwasalsogettingcomplicated.Hewasjugglingmultiplegirls,tryingtokeepthemallhappyandunsuspecting.Amanda,Minnie,Amilia,andAlikaallthoughthewasgenuinelyinterestedinthem,andtheywerealldevelopingfeelingsforhim.

Anthonytriedtokeepupwiththelies,butitwasgettingharderandharder.Hewasstartingtofeellikehewaslosinghimselfintheprocess.Hewasnolongersurewhatwasrealandwhatwasfake.

Oneday,AgathaconfrontedAnthonyabouthisbehavior."What'sgoingon,Anthony?"sheasked."I'veseenyoutalkingtomultiplegirls.What'sgoingon?"

Anthonybrokedown,tellingAgathaab outhisplantogetAshleytoleavehimalon e.Agathawasshocked."Anthony,whath aveyoudone?"sheasked."You'vehurtso manypeople!"

Agatha'swordshitAnthonylikeatonofb ricks.Heknewhehadmadeamistake,but hedidn'tknowhowtofixit.Hewastrappedi nhisownwebofdeceit,andhedidn'tknow howtoescape.

AsAnthonywalkedaway,hecouldn'the lpbutfeelasenseofunease.Heknewhewa splayingwithfire,andhewasafraidofgetti ngburned.

Meanwhile,Ashleywasstartingtonotic eAnthony'sbehavior.Shesawhimtalking toothergirls,andshecouldn'thelpbutfeel apangofjealousy.Shedidn'tknowwhatw asgoingon,butsheknewshedidn'tlikeit.

AshleydecidedtoconfrontAnthony,but whensheapproachedhim,hewaswithAm anda.Ashley'sheartsank,andsheknewsh ehadtogetoutoftherebeforeshesaidsom ethingshewouldregret.

Anthony,ontheotherhand,wasrelieve dtoseeAshleyjealous.Heknewhisplanwa sworking,andhewasdeterminedtoseeitt hrough.

ButashelookedatAmanda,Minnie,Ami lia,andAlika,hecouldn'thelpbutfeelapan gofguilt.Washereallywillingtohurtthema lljusttogetAshley'sattention?

Anthony'sconsciencewasstartingtog etthebetterofhim,andhedidn'tknowho wmuchlongerhecouldkeepupthechara de.

AsAnthonycontinuedtojugglemultipl egirls,hestartedtofeellikehewaslosinghi mselfintheprocess.Hewasbecomingam

astermanipulator,andhedidn'tknowho
w

tostop.Hewastrappedinhisownwebofl
ies,andhedidn'tknowhowtoescape.

Thepressurewasbuilding,andAnthon
yknewhewasinforarudeawakening.Hew
asplayingwithfire,andhewasabouttoget
burned.

Anthony'sfriendsstartedtonoticehisb
ehavior,andtheyweren'tsurewhattoma
keofit.Eric,hisbestfriend,pulledhimasid
eonedayandaskedhimwhatwasgoingon
.Anthonyhesitated,unsureofhowtoexpl
ainhisplanwithoutsoundinglikeajerk.Eri
clistenedpatiently,andthenshookhishe
ad."Dude,you'replayingwithfire,"hesai
d."You'regoingtogetburned."

Anthonyshrugged,tryingtobrushoffE
ric'sconcerns.Butdeepdown,heknewhi
sfriendwasright.Hewastakingahugeris
k,andhedidn'tknowifitwouldpayoff.

AsAnthonycontinuedtojugglemultiplegirls,hestartedtofeellikehewasdrowninginhisowndeceit.Hewasinoverhishead,andhedidn'tknowhowtogetout.

Anthony'smindwasracingwiththoughtsofthegirlshewasplayingwith,andhecouldn'thelpbutfeelasenseofanxiety.
Whatiftheyfoundout?
Whatiftheyhatedhim?
Whatifhegotcaught?
Thequestionsswirledinhishead,makinghimfeellikehewastrappedinanightmare.

Despitehisdoubts,Anthonycontinuedtoplaythegame,convincedthatitwastheonlywaytogetAshley'sattention.Butashelookedatthegirlshewasplayingwith,hecouldn'thelpbutwonderifitwasallworthit.Weretheyjustpawnsinhisgame,orweretheyrealpeoplewithrealfeelings?
Onlytimewouldtell.

AsAnthonywalkedthroughtheschoolh allways,hefeltlikehewaswalkingonthin

ice.Hewaswaitingfortheothershoeto drop,waitingforsomeonetodiscoverhis planandexposehimforthefakehewas.B utfornow,hewouldcontinuetoplaytheg ame,andhopethathewouldn'tgetcaugh t.

Anthony'sphonebuzzedinhispocket,a ndhepulleditouttoseeamessagefromMi nnie."Hey,what'sup?"sheasked,hermes sagereadinglikeaninnocentquestion,bu tAnthonyknewbetter.Hesmiledtohimsel f,feelingasenseofsatisfaction.Thegame wasstillon,andhewaswinning.

Butashelookedatthemessage,hecoul dn'thelpbutfeelapangofguilt.Hewaslea dingMinnieon,andheknewitwaswrong.B uthewasintoodeepnow,andhedidn'tkno whowtostop.

AsAnthonytypedoutaresponsetoMin nie,hecouldn'thelpbutfeelasenseofune ase.Hewasgettingindeeperanddeeper,

and

hedidn'tknowhowtogetout.Buthewas determinedtoseeitthrough,nomatterth ecost.Hehitsend,andwaitedforthenext move,wonderingwhatwouldhappennex t.

Thegamewasgettingmoreandmorec omplicated,andAnthonywasstartingtol osecontrol.Hewasplayingwithfire,andh ewasabouttogetburned.Buthewastoof argonetostopnow,andhewaswillingtori skeverythingtowin.

Anthony'sfriendswerestartingtogetw orriedabouthim.Theycouldseethechan geinhim,andtheydidn'tknowhowtohelp him.Erictriedtotalktohimagain,butAnth onyjustshruggeditoff."I'mfine,"hesaid." IknowwhatI'mdoing."

ButEricwasn'tconvinced.HeknewAnt honywasintrouble,andhedidn'tknowho wtogethimoutofit.

AsAnthonycontinuedtoplaythegame,hestartedtorealizethathewaslosinghimselfintheprocess.Hewasbecomingsomeonehedidn'trecognize,andhedidn'tknowhowtostop.

Anthony'smindwasracingwiththoughtsofthegirlshewasplaying,andhecouldn'thelpbutfeelasenseofanxiety.Whatiftheyfoundout?Whatiftheyhatedhim?
Whatifhegotcaught?
Thequestionsswirledinhishead,makinghimfeellikehewastrappedinanightmare.

Despitehisdoubts,Anthonycontinuedtoplaythegame,convincedthatitwastheonlywaytogetAshley'sattention.Butashelookedatthegirlshewasplaying,hecouldn'thelpbutwonderifitwasallworthit.Werethey justpawnsinhisgame,orweretheyrealpeoplewithrealfeelings?
Onlytimewouldtell

TheReckoning

Thegamewasover,andAnthonyhadlost.Hehadplayedwithfire,andnowhewasgettingburned.Thewebofdeceithehadspunhadfinallycaughtupwithhim,andhewastrapped.

ItstartedwithamessagefromAmanda."Anthony,weneedtotalk,"shesaid.

Anthony'sheartsankashereadthemessage.Heknewhewasintrouble.

Amandaconfrontedhim,tearsinhereyes."Anthony,Iknowwhat'sgoingon,"shesaid."Iknowyou'replayingme,andtheothers.

Howcouldyoudothistous?"

Anthonytriedtodenyit,butitwastoolate.Thetruthwasout,andthegirlswerefurious.Minnie,Amilia,andAlikaallconfrontedhim,demandingtoknowwhyhehadlie

dtothem.

Anthonywasbombardedwithmess agesandcallsfromthegirls,allofthem angryandhurt.Hedidn'tknowhowtore spond,didn'tknowhowtomakeitright.

Ashleywasthelastonetofindout.Sheco nfrontedhim,hereyesblazingwithanger. "Anthony,howcouldyoudothis?"sheask ed."Ithoughtyouweredifferent."

Anthonywasdevastated.Hehadlostev erything:hisfriends,hisreputation,andth egirlshehadhurt.Hewasleftwithnothing buthisguiltandhisshame.

Butashesatinhisemptyclassroom,so methinginsidehimchanged.Herealizedt hathehadbeenlivingalie,anditwastimet omakethingsright.

Anthonygatheredhiscourageandreac hedouttothegirls,askingforameeting.Th eyagreed,andtheyallmetataquietcafé.

Anthonylookedatthem,hiseyesfilledw ithtears."I'msosorry,"hesaid,hisvoicesh aking."Iwaswrong,andIknowIhurtyouall .Iwasblindedbymyownegoanddesirefor attention.Ididn'tseeyouaspeople,butas pawnsinmygame.Iwaswrong,andI'mas hamedofwhatIdid."

Thegirlslookedathim,theirexpression ssoftening.Theysawthepainandregretin hiseyes,andtheyknewhewasgenuine.

Amandaspokeupfirst."Anthony,wefor giveyou,"shesaid."Butyouneedtoforgiv eyourself,too.We'veallmademistakes,a ndit'showwelearnfromthemthatmatter s."

Theothergirlsnoddedinagreement,andAn thonyfeltaweightliftoffhisshoulders.

Ashleysmiled,hereyesstillalittlesad." Anthony,Ithinkyou'reagoodperson,buty

ouneedtofindyourselfandfigureoutwho

youwanttobe.We'rehereforyou,butyo uneedtodothework."

Anthonynodded,feelingasenseofhop e.Heknewitwouldn'tbeeasy,buthewas willingtotry.

Thegirlsforgavehim,andtheyallstarte dtorebuildtheirrelationships.Anthonyle arnedtobehonestandauthentic,andhefo undtruefriendsintheprocess.

Ashewalkedthroughtheschoolhallwa ys,Anthonyfeltasenseofpeace.Hehadfo undhimself,andhewasfinallyatpeace.

Anthony'sfriendsstartedtocomebackt ohim,onebyone.Ericwasthefirst,followe dbyAgathaandtheothers.Theywelcome dhimbackwithopenarms,andAnthonyw asgratefulfortheirforgiveness.

Asthedaysturnedintoweeks,Anthony'srel ationshipswiththegirlsgrewstronger.

Theybecamehisclosestfriends,andh
ewasgratefulfortheirsupport.

Anthony'sgradesstartedtoimprove,a
ndhebecamemoreconfidentinhimself.H
ejoinedtheschool'sdebateteamandstar
tedtodevelopapassionforpublicspeakin
g.

AshleyandAnthonystartedtodevelop
feelingsforeachother,buttheytookthin
gsslow.Theyknewtheyneededtobuilda
strongfoundationoftrustandfriendship
beforetheycouldeventhinkaboutroman
ce.

Asthesemestercametoaclose,Anthon
yreflectedonthelessonshehadlearned.H
ehadlearnedthathonestyandauthenticit
ywerethemostimportantthingsinlife,an
dthatplayinggameswithpeople'semotio
nswasneverworthit.

Anthony'sstorywasfinallycomingtoa

nend,butheknewthatthiswasjustthe

beginningofanewchapterinhislife.He wasexcitedtoseewhatthefutureheld,an dhewasgratefulforthefriendshehadmad ealongtheway.

Andso,Anthonyclosedthedooronhisol dlifeandsteppedintoabrighterfuture,rea dytofacewhateverchallengescamehisw ay.

TheEnd